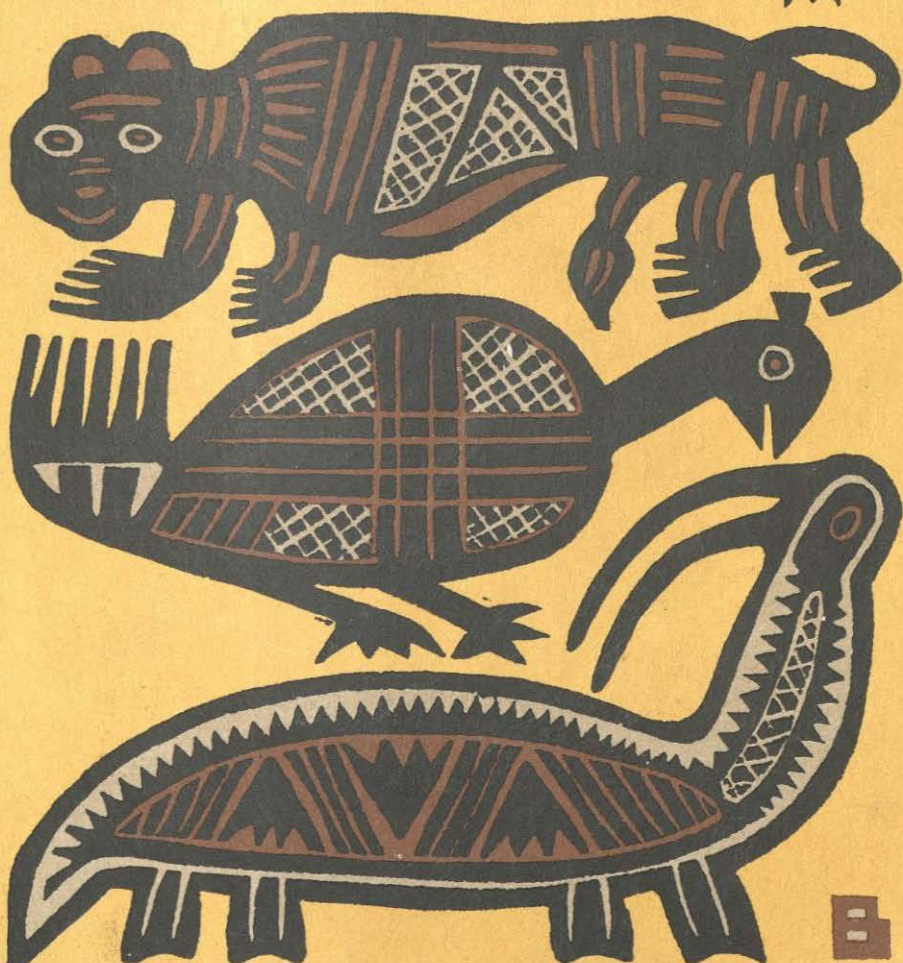




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Afro-American Folktales: Stories from Black Traditions in the New World



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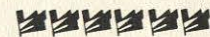


**Traditional Stories
of the Black World**



Selected and Retold by

Roger D. Abrahams



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Three storytellers met one day and began to tell stories. Each of them thought that he could excel the others. The first man said, "I will tell you the story of what I saw."

"One day I went into the field and saw two birds fighting. One bird swallowed the other, and then in turn was swallowed by the other bird, so that the two birds swallowed each other."

The next one said, "One day I was going out to the field and I saw a man on the road who had cut off his own head and had it in his mouth eating it."

The third man said, "I was going to a big town and I saw a woman coming from the town with a house, a farm, and all her things on her head. I asked the woman where she was going, and she told me she had heard news that she had never heard before. I asked her what it was. The woman said she had heard the news that one man cut off his head and had it in his mouth eating it, so I was afraid and left the town. The woman passed and I went on."

Who told the biggest story?

Table of Contents

Preface	xiii
Introduction	1
Part I. Tales of Wonder from the Great Ocean of Story	31
INTRODUCTION	33
DEMANE AND DEMAZANA	35
THE PASSWORD	37
THE THREE TESTS	42
MONKEY STEALS A DRUM	45
A MAN WHO COULD TRANSFORM HIMSELF	56
TALE OF AN OLD WOMAN	57
THE KING'S DAUGHTER WHO LOST HER HAIR	59
PROFITABLE AMENDS	64
THE MAN AND THE MUSKRAT	69
THE HARE'S HOE	71
WHY THE HARE RUNS AWAY	74
THE TORTOISE AND THE FALCON	75
RUBIYA	78
THE FLYING LION	83
A-MAN-AMONG-MEN	86
A COMPETITION OF LIES	89
Part II. Stories to Discuss and Even Argue About	107
INTRODUCTION	109
THE CONTEST OF RIDDLES	111
LEOPARD, GOAT, AND YAM	112
AN EYE FOR AN EYE?	113

WONDERFUL POWERS: MIRROR, SANDALS, AND A MEDICINE BAG	114
THE DEVIL COMES BETWEEN THEM	115
THE QUALITY OF FRIENDSHIP	116
THE FOUR CHAMPIONS	118
WHO SHOULD HE KILL?	119
KILLING VIRTUE	120
A SPIRITED CONTENDING	122
LOVE CAUSED IT ALL	123
KILLED FOR A HORSE	127
THREE WIVES	129
THE FIVE HELPERS	130
MANY MIRACLES	131
THEIR EYES CAME OUT	133
HE STARVED HIS OWN	134
THE SMART MAN AND THE FOOL	136
FEMBAR'S CURIOSITY	138
A FATHER'S ADVICE	139
IS IT RIGHT THAT HE SHOULD BITE ME?	140
TAKE ME CAREFULLY, CAREFULLY	141
TIGER SLIGHTS THE TORTOISE	142
THE NATURE OF THE BEAST	144
THE DISOBEDIENT SISTERS	145
RICH MAN, POOR MAN	147
FINDERS KEEPERS	149
THE LEOPARD WOMAN	150

Part III. Tales of Trickster and Other Ridiculous Creatures: Tales to Entertain

INTRODUCTION	153
WHY MONKEYS LIVE IN TREES	155
ALL THE LITTLE ANIMALS	158
WHY THE DOG ALWAYS CHASES OTHER ANIMALS	159
THE STORY OF HLAKANYANA	165
CURSING THE BIRDS	166
SAVING THE RAIN	176
STUFFING THE HYENA	178
CUTTING THE ELEPHANT'S HIPS	180
THE CLEVER WAKASANKE	182
THE TRICKSTERS' ENCOUNTER	183
HOW SQUIRREL ROBBED RABBIT OF HIS TAIL	185
	187

VICTIMS OF VANITY	188
DEATH BY BURNING	189
THE ANT'S BURDEN	190
THEIR SOFT CROWNS DISCOVERED	192
THE PIG'S NOSE AND THE BABOON'S REAR	193
ONE TRICK DESERVES ANOTHER	193
THE PLEASURE OF HIS COMPANY	197
THE DOG EATS ALL THE ANTS	198
NO LONGER FEAR THE COCK'S COMB	200
HOW HONEY GUIDE CAME TO HAVE POWER OVER HONEY	201
THE TRAPPER TRAPPED	203
MEDICINE TO CATCH HIM	203
FRIENDS FOR A TIME	204
THE GREAT OVERLAND TREK	206
THE SHUNDI AND THE COCK	209
SPIDER OUTWITS THE RICH WOMAN	212
SOFTLY, OVER THE HEAD OF THE GREAT	216
TREACHERY REPAID	219
THE GREAT DIKITHI	220
THE WORK DONE BY ITSELF	225
TWO FRIENDS FROM THEIR CHILDHOOD	227
TALKING DRUMS DISCOVERED	228

Part IV. Tales in Praise of Great Doings 231

INTRODUCTION	233
GASSIRE'S LUTE	235
THE MWINDO EPIC	240

Part V. Making a Way Through Life 295

INTRODUCTION	297
SALT, SAUCE, AND SPICE, ONION LEAVES, PEPPER, AND DRIPPINGS	299
THE OLD WOMAN WITH SORES	301
HOW IT PAYS SOMETIMES TO BE SMALL	303
THE CLOTH OF PEMBE MIRUI	304
THE WOOING BATTLE	306
THE ORPHAN WITH THE CLOAK OF SKIN	309
TUNGULULI AND THE MASTERS	311
CHAMELEON INTO NEEDLE	315
MOTHER COME BACK	316



THE THREE SISTERS	320
THE MESSENGER BIRD	324
THE CHILD IN THE REEDS	326
A WOMAN'S QUEST	333
NEVER ASK ME ABOUT MY FAMILY	336
A MAN MARRIES A LIONESS	338

Bibliography	343
---------------------	------------

Permissions Acknowledgments	347
------------------------------------	------------

Index of Tales	351
-----------------------	------------



Preface

To attempt to put a representative selection of the tales of Black Africa in a single work may seem futile to those who know the subcontinent. Like any such huge geographical region, there is a tremendous range of size, character, and complexity in the societies and cultures of Africa—a range that runs from the elegant and sophisticated ancient city cultures to the forest and desert peoples, who continue to live by the simplest hunting-and-gathering techniques. Immense kingdoms and nations coexist with very small bands, all with their own deep and venerable traditions.

One of the greatest social and cultural achievements of all times came about in the subcontinent, when a great gardening people, within a few thousand years, brought a major portion of it under cultivation. Their accomplishment reflects the high value such an agricultural economy places on land and large expanding families.

But Black Africa includes numerous kinds of wandering peoples: small bands like the forest people of the Ituri and the desert people of the Kalahari, both constantly on the move in search of food; the pastoral nomads, who, along with their people, move huge herds in a progress of watering places; the slash-and-burn agriculturists, who regularly move whole villages as their land plays out; and that widespread contemporary phenomenon, the wage-seeking emigrants, who move to plantation or city, and sometimes even return home. Moreover, there are innumerable peoples who follow the archaic religions of the Spoken Word and equally immense numbers who follow Christ or Muhammad, with all of the cultural implications carried by such religions of the Book. Finally, there are literally thousands of different languages spoken in this area, so many, indeed, that two of the great trade languages, Creole and Swahili, developed specifically as means for the various Africans to understand each other.

In the face of such diversity and the immense geographical areas covered, how could one possibly hope to make any meaningful cultural statement through the putting together of a representative anthology? Fortunately, the question has been answered again and again for us, by Black Africans themselves, and by European and American observers: In spite of the range of culture-types, there are widely observable continuities, especially in the area of aesthetics, to be found in groups throughout the continent. The kinds of materials included in this anthology reveal a powerful tradition. These stories are related through their manner of performance to a number of other kinds of expression for which Black Africa is known to Westerners, especially dancing and

And so it will always be: having children leads you on the way of truth. A woman was going to kill *Ngana Kimona-ngombe*, but his child, *Ndala*, saved his life.

So the story ends.

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Index of Tales



A-Man-Among-Men (<i>Hausa</i>)	86	Great Dikithi, The (<i>Bantu</i>)	220
All the Little Animals (<i>Gbaya</i>)	159	Great Overland Trek, The	
Ant's Burden, The (<i>Hausa</i>)	190	(<i>Amalouw</i> or <i>Amakosa</i>)	206
Chameleon into Needle		Hare's Hoe, The (<i>Thanga</i>)	71
(<i>Hausa</i>)	315	He Starved His Own (<i>Fjort</i>)	134
Child in the Reeds, The		How Honey Guide Came to	
(<i>Basuto</i>)	326	Have Power over Honey	
Clever Wakasanke, The		(<i>Ila</i>)	201
(<i>Baganda</i>)	183	How It Pays Sometimes to Be	
Cloth of Pembe Mirui, The		Small (<i>Ituri</i>)	303
(<i>Swahili</i>)	304	How Squirrel Robbed Rabbit	
Competition of Lies, A		of His Tail (<i>Ila</i>)	187
(<i>Mende</i>)	89	Is It Right That He Should	
Contest of Riddles, The		Bite Me? (<i>Amalouw</i> or	
(<i>Abron</i>)	111	<i>Amakosa</i>)	140
Cursing the Birds (<i>Ila</i>)	176	Killed for a Horse (<i>Hausa</i>)	127
Cutting the Elephant's Hips		Killing Virtue (<i>Ashanti</i>)	120
(<i>Baganda</i>)	182	King's Daughter Who Lost	
Death by Burning (<i>Ila</i>)	189	Her Hair, The (<i>Akamba</i>)	59
Demane and Demazana		Leopard, Goat, and Yam	
(<i>Kaffir</i>)	35	(<i>Hausa</i>)	112
Devil Comes Between Them,		Leopard Woman, The	
The (<i>Hausa</i>)	115	(<i>Liberia</i>)	150
Disobedient Sisters, The		Love Caused It All (<i>Limba</i>)	123
(<i>Igbo</i>)	145	Man and the Muskrat, The	
Dog Eats All the Ants, The		(<i>Fipa</i>)	69
(<i>Baganda</i>)	198	Man Marries a Lioness, A	
Eye for an Eye?, An (<i>Hausa</i>)	113	(<i>Mbundu</i>)	338
Father's Advice, A (<i>Wayao</i>)	139	Man Who Could Transform	
Fembar's Curiosity (<i>Liberia</i>)	138	Himself, A (<i>Akamba</i>)	56
Finders Keepers (<i>Bondei</i>)	149	Many Miracles (<i>Karekare</i>)	131
Five Helpers, The (<i>Grumshi</i>)	130	Medicine to Catch Him (<i>Vai</i>)	203
Flying Lion, The (<i>S. Africa</i>)	83	Messenger Bird, The	
Four Champions, The		(<i>Thanga</i>)	324
(<i>Hausa</i>)	118	Monkey Steals a Drum	
Friends for a Time (<i>Krachi</i>)	204	(<i>Yoruba</i>)	45
Gassire's Lute (<i>Soninke</i>)	235	Mother Come Back (<i>Berre-</i>	
		<i>MuKuni</i>)	316

Mwindo Epic, The (<i>Nyanga</i>)	240	Stuffing the Hyena	180
Nature of the Beast, The		(<i>Kiniramba</i>)	
(<i>Hausa</i>)	144	Take Me Carefully, Carefully	141
Never Ask Me About My		(<i>Kaguru</i>)	
Family (<i>Kikuyu</i>)	336	Tale of an Old Woman	57
No Longer Fear the Cock's		(<i>Bondei</i>)	
Comb (<i>Baganda</i>)	200	Talking Drums Discovered	228
Old Woman with Sores, The		(<i>Wala</i>)	
(<i>Ituri</i>)	301	Their Eyes Came Out	133
One Trick Deserves Another		(<i>Hausa</i>)	
(<i>Kikuyu</i>)	193	Their Soft Crowns Discovered	192
Orphan with the Cloak of		(<i>Wayao</i>)	
Skin, The (<i>Hausa</i>)	309	Three Sisters, The (<i>Fipa</i>)	320
Password, The (<i>Dahomey</i>)	37	Three Tests, The (<i>Swahili</i>)	42
Pig's Nose and the Baboon's		Three Wives (<i>Dagomba</i>)	129
Rear, The (<i>Wayao</i>)	193	Tiger Slights the Tortoise	142
Pleasure of His Company, The		(<i>Igbo</i>)	
(<i>Wayao</i>)	197	Tortoise and the Falcon, The	75
Profitable Amends (<i>Dahomey</i>)	64	(<i>Bondei</i>)	
Quality of Friendship, The		Trapper Trapped, The (<i>Vai</i>)	203
(<i>Vai</i>)	116	Treachery Repaid (<i>Fipa</i>)	219
Rich Man, Poor Man		Tricksters' Encounter, The	185
(<i>Akamba</i>)	147	(<i>Luo</i>)	
Rubiya (<i>Swahili</i>)	78	Tungululi and the Masters	311
Salt, Sauce, and Spice, Onion		(<i>Fipa</i>)	
Leaves, Pepper, and		Two Friends from Their	227
Drippings (<i>Hausa</i>)	299	Childhood (<i>Fjort</i>)	
Saving the Rain (<i>Amalouw</i> or		Victims of Vanity (<i>Wayao</i>)	188
<i>Amakosa</i>)	178	Who Should He Kill? (<i>Hausa</i>)	119
Shundi and the Cock, The		Why Monkeys Live in Trees	158
(<i>Bondei</i>)	209	(<i>Ewe</i>)	
Smart Man and the Fool, The		Why the Dog Always Chases	165
(<i>Fjort</i>)	136	Other Animals (<i>Ituri</i>)	
Softly, Over the Head of the		Why the Hare Runs Away	74
Great (<i>Dahomey</i>)	216	(<i>Ewe</i>)	
Spider Outwits the Rich		Woman's Quest, A (<i>Wala</i>)	333
Woman (<i>Zande</i>)	212	Wondrous Powers: Mirror,	
Spirited Contending, A		Sandals, and a Medicine	114
(<i>Hausa</i>)	122	Bag (<i>Togo</i>)	
Story of Hlakanyana, The		Wooing Battle, The (<i>Kikuyu</i>)	306
(<i>Kaffir</i>)	166	Work Done by Itself, The	225
		(<i>Ewe</i>)	

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